

Easter Island-Inspired Board Games

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EASTER ISLAND IS THE TOPIC of many scientific papers, books, and one excellent bi-annual *Journal*. However, the Island's appeal is broader than just to the scientific community or adventure travelers, as evidenced in part by the variety of adult board games designed with Rapa Nui as their theme. In much of the world, board games are associated with children (*Monopoly*), as party games (like *Trivial Pursuit*), or as tactical war simulations. But in Western Europe, and increasingly in the United States, Japan, and Korea, board games for adults are a rapidly growing and intellectual alternative to television or rented movies. It is this sector of game designers that have discovered Easter Island; the results are impressive.

The first of these games appeared in 1989, designed by Dr. Reinhold Wittig and produced by a small German company. Called *Hotu Matua*, it is based upon travel through Polynesia to discover new islands. Although it is not directly about Easter Island, the label shows a sketch of Rano Raraku's quarry.

move. This game was nominated for Germany's prestigious *Spiel des Jahres* (Game of the Year) award and the box cover and pieces alone make it worthwhile to seek out for any collector of Rapa Nui material.

For the next 11 years, the board game world ignored the island despite producing thousands of new game designs. But, since 2006, five new designs have emerged. Two of these continue the trend of using the island as the theme but with a game not based on the island itself; three of them provide a game that is based upon an historically accurate understanding of the island's past. French publisher, Twilight Creations, have a new game simply called *Easter Island* and this is a two-player strategy game using a board with a map of the island and pieces in the form of small *moai*. The goal of the game is not related to the island or its history, but to move the *moai* in ways to protect your pieces while eliminating the others. Yet, with this title and components, the game is of some interest and may encourage players to inquire about the island.

Wittig, who has visited Rapa Nui, designs many games, and this year he returned to the island theme with a beautiful game called *Rapa Nui*. It features a wooden board carved in the accurate shape of Rapa Nui; the game pieces fit into spaces on the wooden board/island. The game is a territory-control competition and, like a few of the others, play does not directly relate to the island's history. Next to Randolph's *Die Oster Insel*, this is the best looking game in the group.

A small American publisher, Stratamax Games, produced a limited edition game called *Hatu Matu: Chief of Easter Island*. What makes this game interesting is that, for the first time, the game is actually about the development of the island and uses the island's resource constraints as

its primary game idea. The winner is the player that raises the most *moai*, and to do this they must manage resources of food, manual labor, wood, and craftsmen in a balanced contest to produce the statues as resources gradually diminish. This game brings to light many of the island's real de-



Game pieces in the shape of *moai* are featured in this game, called *Die Oster Insel*, from Germany.

In 1994, American designer Alex Randolph (best known for the popular 3M game *Twixt*), published *Die Oster Insel*, in association with Blatz, a German publisher. This game uses four large plastic *moai* as the pieces, and players race them, using a bluffing idea implemented by placing small rocks into the *moai* to determine how far they



A wooden board in the shape of Rapa Nui has game pieces that fit into spaces on the board/island.

developmental issues but does so in a game that enlightens, in a non-judgmental way, the island's history.

In early 2007, two new games using the island as a historical backdrop will be released. They continue the trend of United States' publisher, Face-2-Face Games, in releasing *Moai*, a game that promises to be more strongly researched than *Hatu Matu*. The game begins with the population of Easter Island at its peak of over 10,000, exceeding the capabilities of the small island's ecosystem. Quoting from the game's rulebook:

"...resources become scarce, and the once lush palm forests were destroyed – cleared for agriculture and moving the massive stone *moai*. In this regard, Easter Island has become, for many, a metaphor for ecological disaster. Thereafter, a thriving and advanced social order began to decline into bloody civil war. In this game the players will lead their Rapa Nui clans to cope with the ecological disaster. By the arrival of Admiral Roggeveen (the end of the game) they must have the best status possible."

Another American publisher, GMT Games, is nearing production of a game called *Conquest of Paradise*. This is a game of empire building in Polynesia, and Easter Island appears as part of the game's infrastructure. As GMT describes: "Players explore the unknown ocean around them, hoping to discover the most lucrative island groups, and colonize them. They build canoes and train warriors to cre-

ate a force to defend their empire, while forging lines of communication with their developing discoveries. Resources are scarce; using them wisely is a key to victory. Investing in exploration widens your empire. Building warriors strengthens your empire. Investing resources into cultural innovations can yield unexpected dividends, like tattooing, hula dancing, surfing, or even the giant *moai* statues of Easter Island fame."

Playing some of these games is a great way to introduce the island to friends and, by doing so, encourages discussion of the island's culture and appeal. In a world where game designers often rely on historical European themes for game ideas, it is encouraging to see games based upon the fascinating and wonderful Rapa Nui. What better way to spend an evening than trying one of these new games and then talking about what they got right, what they got wrong, and how to do it even better!

GAME RESOURCES

Hotu Matua and *Die Oster Insel* are no longer in print. The best source is to visit www.boardgamegeek.com, a searchable database of board games, and look for these games as someone may be selling/trading a copy. *Rapa Nui* is available online from its German publisher, Giseh Verlag (www.giseh.net). *Conquest of Paradise* can be pre-ordered from GMT Games (www.gmtgames.com). Look for the "P-500" section (they confirm 500 pre-orders before the game is actually printed). The other games are or will shortly be sold by Funagain Games (www.funagain.com) of Ashland, Oregon. They ship worldwide.

Ben Baldanza is President and CEO of Spirit Airlines, the largest low-fare carrier serving the US to the Caribbean and Latin America. Ben and his wife Marcia share a love of travel and have a library of Easter Island publications, and stay informed through RNJ. They look forward to re-visiting the island in a few years, taking their new son, Enzo Anthony, to encourage the next generation of Rapa Nui supporters.

WHILE NOT A "GAME," an archaeological "toy" aimed at 10 year-olds and based on a Rapa Nui *moai* was found in a used book store by Shawn McLaughlin. The kit includes a block of clay-like material. With a short wooden stick, one "excavates" two halves of a small *moai*, puts them together, and then displays the "find". Released in 1996 from the Bahamas, instructions in several languages are included and a booklet contains a bit about archaeology and Easter Island.